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ABSTRACT

DISSATISFACTION WITH TRADITIONAL GRADING PRACTICES HAS BEEN INCREASING STEADILY DURING THE PAST FEW YEARS. ALTHOUGH ALTERNATIVE METHODS HAVE BEEN USED BY MANY INSTITUTIONS, THERE WILL BE NO COMMONLY ACCEPTED SYSTEM UNTIL SOME AGREEMENT HAS BEEN REACHED ON THE GOALS OF GRADUATE LEVEL INSTRUCTION AND GRADING. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE TO INDICATE THAT UNDERGRADUATE GRADES ARE PREDICTIVE OF GRADUATE PERFORMANCE. SUCCESS AT THE GRADUATE LEVEL MAY BE DEPENDENT ON A DIFFERENT PATTERN OF ABILITIES AND PROFICIENCIES. GIVEN THE ATTRITION RATE, THE PROBLEM OF GRADUATE ADMISSIONS IS BADLY RESOLVED BY RELIANCE ON GRADES. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROFESSOR AND STUDENT STRONGLY AFFECTS GRADES. TOO FEW PROFESSORS TAKE, OR HAVE THE TIME, TO CONSULT EXTENSIVELY WITH THEIR STUDENTS, THEREBY DEPRIVING GRADUATE STUDENTS OF MUCH NEEDED ADVICE AND SOMETIMES OF A FAIR ASSESSMENT. ANOTHER AREA OF CONCERN INVOLVES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRADING AND THE NATURE OF THE DISCIPLINE. AN ANSWER MAY BE FOUND IN A MIXED GRADING SYSTEM THAT TAKES INTO ACCOUNT THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE VARIOUS AREAS OF THE COLLEGE CURRICULUM, THE MEANS OF APPRAISAL AVAILABLE TO INSTRUCTORS IN THESE AREAS, AND THE DIFFERENT PURPOSES TO BE SERVED BY APPRAISING AND REPORTING STUDENTS' PROGRESS. (AF)

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GRADING THE GRADUATE STUDENT: A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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Iadarola-1

One need only give a cursory examination to the Educational Index for the past few years and note the evidence of a growing dissatisfaction with many facets of grading. Educational periodicals are inundated with such articles as "Down with Grades," "To Mark or Not to Mark," "In Defense of Grades," "Will My Johnny Make the Grade?" The revolutionary changes that are occurring on college campuses today may well have rendered the traditional marking systems obsolete and ineffective, at best. At worst, they may even be a deterrent to learning and an obstacle to the achievement of basic educational values.

During the past five years, as Dean Winston Benson has written, there has been an increase in the adoption of "less traditional" grading systems on the graduate level. Many earnest and sincere administrators, eager to find solutions to the so-called "grade grubbing" problem, are now experimenting with single forms of non-ranked evaluations such as pass-fail, credit-no credit, faculty progress reports and student dossiers. In spite of all this experimentation, and it is still too early to effectively evaluate results, the conclusion reached by John Dobbin and Ann Smith in 1960 still applies today:

> . . . although research has uncovered some limitations and suggested some promising direction in marking procedure, no commonly accepted system has emerged from half a century of inquiry. Perhaps the development of such a system awaits agreement on the goals of instruction and the purpose of marking.[1]

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[1] John E. Dobbin and Ann Z. Smith, "Mar[illegible]d Marking Systems," Encyclopedia of Educational Research, edited [illegible]ester H. Harris (3rd ed., New York: Macmillan Company, 1960), p. 789.

HE 001 309

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What precisely are the goals of instruction on the graduate level? How do these goals of instruction affect grading on this level? What validity do traditional and even less traditional grades have when applied to graduate students engaged in research, professional students in the health sciences and in the clinical phases of their training, or student teachers in classroom situations? It is the purpose of my talk this evening to attempt to answer these questions. In doing this, I would like to single out three areas of vital concern to the graduate student, areas which either affect him directly or indirectly in his endeavor to attain an advanced degree.

The first concern has to do with grading and graduate admissions. Those who advocate the status quo in grading point at the important use made of grades in graduate school admissions and in transfers. But there is significant evidence to show that the whole matter of graduate admissions is badly handled--one need only point to the attrition rates between graduate school admissions and Ph.D's granted. As in so many areas of this whole problem of grading, more research is needed, but the U.S. Government estimates that the attrition rate is as high as 20 to 1.[2] If these figures are accurate, then whatever system graduate schools are using for admissions is not highly effective.

Do undergraduate college grades predict graduate grades? And if they do, how much? Evidence again here is scanty. But, as D.P. Hoyt has indicated, while one may find some correlation between high school grades A to F, and college grades A to F, it is impossible to do the same at the ...

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2 Patricia S. Wright, Enrollment for Advanced Degrees (OE-54019-63, Circular No. 786). Washington: Office of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1965.

graduate level.[3] In other words, though many graduate officers say that college grades predict success in graduate school and so should serve as an admission criterion, there is virtually no evidence for the assumption. It is just possible, particularly in light of the staggering attrition rates, that the wrong people are admitted in graduate school. As A.E. Juola has stated:

> Success at more advanced levels may be dependent upon a totally different pattern of abilities and proficiencies from that operative at a lower level. A recent study of factors related to success in a graduate school of psychology, for example, established that the undergraduate grade point average in science courses was more significant than undergraduate psychology grades.[4]

The problem of graduate admissions then, may be very badly resolved by grades. It might be better to give graduate admissions officers more resources to carry on extensive admissions investigations--the extra money in the long run would benefit the student, the teacher, the administration and society.

The next area of conern is grading and the relationship that should exist between the student and his major professor. When the graduate student selects a major professor, he expects that professor to guide him for the duration of his graduate program at that institution. A professor I know schedules a weekly meeting with each of his graduate students. At that appointed time, the students' research, his academic progress, his

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3 D.P. Hoyt, "The Relationship Between College Grades and Adult Achievement: A Review of the Literature," Research Reports, American College Testing Program, 1965, 7, i.

4 A.E. Juola, "Selection, Classification, and Placement of Students." In P.L. Dressel and Associates, Evaluation in Higher Education, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

existing problems, and even the latest on Vice President Agnew, are among the many topics discussed. This professor does not limit his time when it comes to consultation with his students. Nor does he limit his association with his students to school hours but furthers their intellectual development on his own time, in the evenings and on weekends. I believe this is an exceptional case where the professor unselfishly gives his time for the betterment of his students. This situation is by no means universal. One need only check office hours of professors per week--an average of an hour and a half is hardly enough time to handle grad students--never mind the fact that most professors teach undergraduate courses and must accomodate undergraduates as well at this time.

However, one must not be blind to the obstacles and pressures confronting professors who would very much like to engage in this type of learning process. Some institutions permit their professors to handle far too many graduate students at one time. Committee involvement devours a sizeable portion of a professor's time. If students are plagued with "grade grubbing" problems, professors have "publishing grubbing" problems. Professors up for contract renewal or tenure are concerned, and understandably so, with getting that book published or squeezing an article out of that Ph.D. dissertation. Ironically enough, the professor is usually given less hours in the classroom as a reward for such publications--fewer students get the benefit of his scholarly research.

Grading is not only an academic problem. It is a human one as well, and at times this is very often forgotten. There is no doubt that if there were a tighter bond between the major professor and his graduate student, the solution to assessment would greatly be enhanced.

The third and final area of concern involves the relationship between grading and the nature of the discipline which is to be graded. In short, grading critics charge that the present grading practice is not based on a rationale which suits the form of grading to its intended function. They are not "hung up" on such questions as Shall there be a pass-fail system? Shall the usual ABCDF system be retained? Shall there be no grades but instead a series of written evaluations? Instead of instituting one type of non-ranked evaluation, these critics contend that institutions should adopt a mixed grading system that takes into account the nature of knowledge in the various areas of the college curriculum, the means of appraisal available to instructors in these areas, and the differing purposes to be served by appraising and reporting student progress.

This approach certainly seems sensible and feasible. It does more squarely face the problem of grading in terms of "the goals of instruction and the purpose of marking." If we were to look at a standard college curriculum, we can group disciplines in categories in terms of precision of knowledge. If placed in a paradigm, the subjects may be grouped into three categories:

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Mathematics	the professions	the humanities
the physical sciences	the performing arts	some social sciences
some social sciences		

Although not precise, this classification is a viable one. It is true that the state of knowledge in certain areas makes classification of some subjects difficult--for example, sociology and linguistics. The placement of

such subjects in the paradigm will depend upon the particular institution's approach to them thus allowing for flexibility.

In regard to Category I, we can with a considerable degree of certitude speak about the structure of knowledge, the approaches to learning and discovery, and the systematic nature of mathematics and most of the physical and some of the social sciences. Without denying the creative aspects of these subjects, one can state that either a student understands or doesn't understand the concepts, learns the proper approaches tor does not, masters certain agreed on content or does not. By their nature these fields of study are better ordered, more sequential--one must pass elementary algebra in order to learn intermediate. If mastery is not achieved at the first level, the student cannot succeed at the next. The pass-fail approach seems warranted in the subjects of this category.

In Category 2, the performing arts and the professions, knowledge and practicing skill are interwoven. The college prepares the student through a combination of content and application so that he may test his adequacy in a performing environment--whether it be the classroom, the hospital, law office or stage. A value judgment of the student's potential for success is made, after which a degree or a certificate of permission to pursue the profession or art is awarded. Again, it would appear that either pass-fail or a certificate of accomplishment is needed as a grading mechanism.

In Category 3, the humanities and some of the social sciences, knowledge is less precisely structured and more conjectoral. In such fields as philosophy, literature, sociology, and history, finer distinctions are necessary. Performances is judged by a student's ability to make subtle

discriminations, refined distinctions, comparisons, analysis, synthesis, and one's ability to organize and write. Where qualitiative rather than quantitative distinctions are necessary, the A-F grading seems most relevant. However, as Dean David Sparks has indicated regarding the forthcoming recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Grades and Evaluation, the amount of letter grading can drastically be reduced.

Wherever institutions consider differential grading practices throughout their departments, and it appears that this will be the future trend, most certainly a rationale, perhaps on the order suggested, should be considered.

In the beginning of this talk I raised some questions about particular evaluational problems. I have endeavored to examine these questions from a graduate student point of view, looking at the relationships and interrelationships between such concerns as grading and graduate admissions, grading and the relationship between the graduate student and his major professor, and finally, grading and the nature of the discipline. I have not always given answers to the questions raised. The reason for this is that the questions and the arguments both pro and con involve opinions on such controversial matters as freedom, educational goals, motivation, procedures of measurement, and end-means relations. And, these questions will never be answered until institutional leaders sit down with members from all segments of their campus community and hammer out broad but definite goals to be pursued by their particular institution. This must be accompanied, too, by a more detailed definition of goals in the various graduate departments. This is a painful task. But again, in the words of Dobbin and Smith, not until there is "wider agreement on the goals of instruction and the purpose of marking," and I would add, within each institution, will we begin to find solutions.